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'HIP-HARP' ARTIST

Pops guest does her best to break the mold of harping



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ON MUSIC

GRAND RAPIDS SYMPHONY with harpist Deborah Henson-Conant, conducted by John Varineau, Thursday evening at Cannonsburg Ski Area, 6800 Cannonsburg Road NE. The Bank One Picnic Pops concert repeats at 7:30 tonight. Gates open at 5:30 p.m. for picnicking and preconcert activities. Tickets \$13 adults, \$11 students and seniors on the lawn. A family lawn pass is \$38. Single chair seating is \$21. Individual table seats are \$30 or \$32. Phone 454-9451. Lawn seats only also are available from Ticketmaster outlets at 456-3333.

Deborah Henson-Conant is why they call making music "playing."

She's doing her job, but she's having more fun than most people have on vacation.

When she told the audience "What a great time I've had," Thursday evening at the Grand Rapids Symphony's Picnic Pops, you believed every word. When associate conductor John Varineau repeated it, you believed him, too ...

Calling Henson-Conant a harpist is like referring to Joe DiMaggio as a guy with a bat. Technically, it's accurate, but you're just scratching the surface.

She sings like a gospel singer with a hint of an Irish lilt. She writes quirky songs such as "Belinda," a Spanish-flavored love song about a willow tree.

She acts in character and costume, tells stories and cracks up an audience with insightful observations about aging, record sales and lugging around a harp... Oh, and she certainly does play a wicked harp.

Whether seated at a traditional pedal harp or strapped into a Celtic harp so she could play and stand, Henson-Conant obliterates the stereotype of a prim and proper lady in a long flowing gown delicately picking out Debussy.

In fact, she plays stuff you just wouldn't think could possibly come from the instrument that St. Peter hands out to new arrivals at the pearly gates.

She slapped the lower strings like an electric bass player laying down a funk line. She worked the sharpening levers at the top of her Celtic instrument to imitate a blues guitarist bending notes.

At her classical harp for "Baroque Flamenco," Henson-Conant strummed with one hand and tapped the sound board with the other, sounding just like a Spanish guitarist accompanying the rapid heel clicks of a flamenco dancer.

She brought principal harpist Maria Royce Hesse and percussionist Bill Vits down front for the traditional Celtic tune "Off She Goes" followed by Henson-Conant's sequel "And She's Gone." Both spirited and lots of fun.

Dressed in short black skirt and boots, glittering strapless top and long tresses interwoven with ribbons, Henson-Conant - originally a jazz musician - entertained with bluesy tunes as well as with soft, Irish-flavored lullabies.

In an adventurous solo medley of songs from "The Wizard of Oz," she demonstrated impeccable technique as a seriously trained harpist.

Yet in an encore, entirely without harp, Henson-Conant sang a touching gospel-flavored tune, "Congratulations, You've Made it This Far," dedicating it to everyone "who's ever had a birthday."